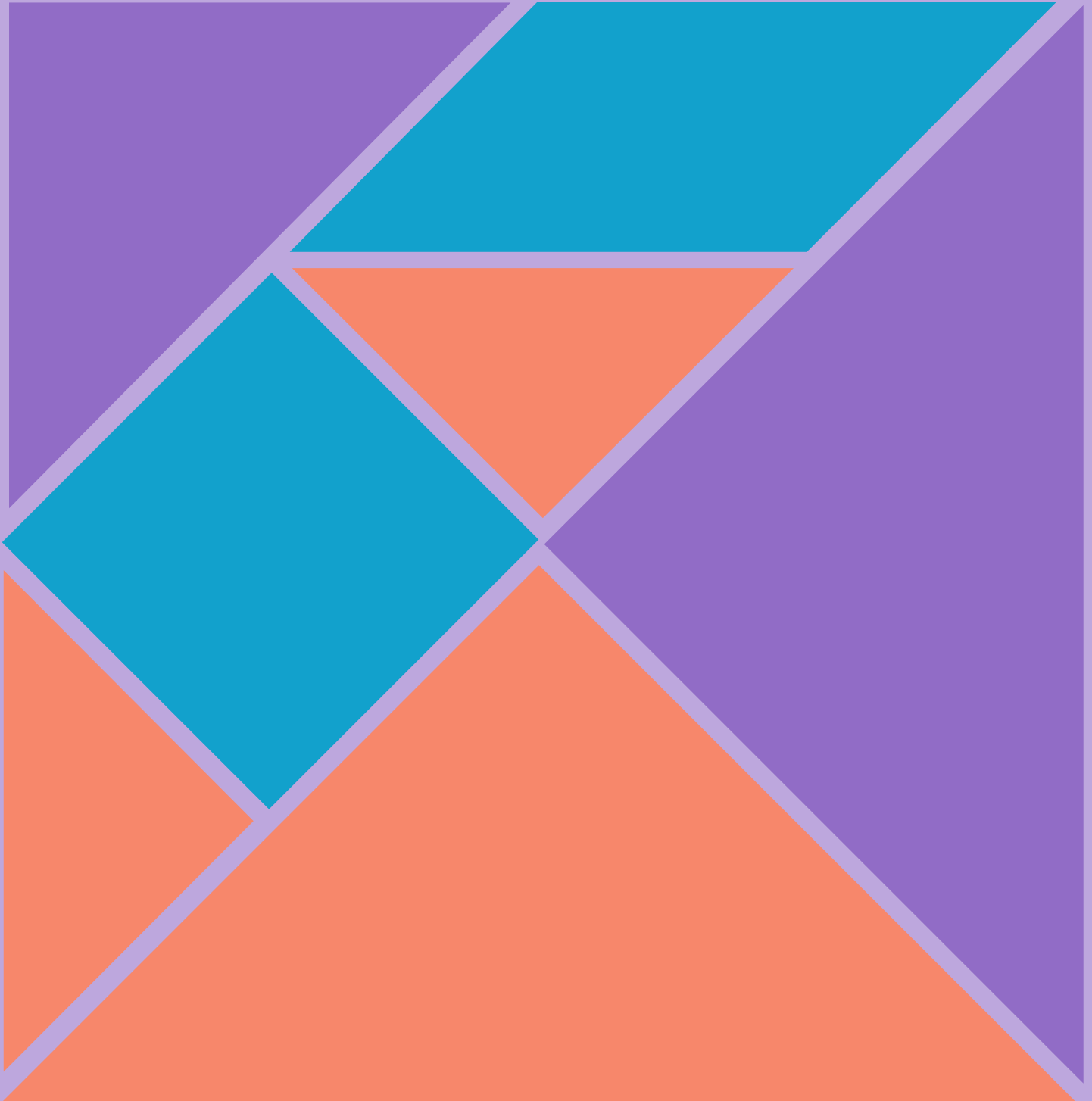


Independent applicants for transfer admission

Understanding the challenges that face a growing
and essential student population





Overview

Independent students are becoming an increasingly central part of higher education, and transfer pathways are critical to their success. In this research, we define Independent Students as applicants who are age 23 or older, military-affiliated, or parenting, many of whom balance college with work, family responsibilities, or prior interruptions in enrollment. Many of these students are also a core focus of Common App's moonshot goal to close the gap in postsecondary access and attainment for students from low- and middle-income communities.

While much of the national conversation around college access focuses on first-year applicants, transferring between institutions is often essential for independent students' educational journeys. Many begin at community colleges close to home, stop out and later re-enroll, or seek more flexible programs that better fit their lives. Understanding how independent students navigate transfer admissions is key to designing systems that truly support their success.

This research brief examines independent applicants using Common App's transfer platform, offering a national, data-rich look at who these students are, where they come from academically, and how they apply. By comparing independent transfer applicants to other transfer applicants, the brief provides important insights for institutions, policymakers, and student advocates seeking to serve this growing population better.

Independent transfer applicants face greater financial and structural barriers

- Applicants who were age 23 or older, military-affiliated, or parenting accounted for **23% of all domestic transfer applicants** using Common App in the 2024–25 application season.
- Transfer applicants aged 23 or older and military-affiliated applicants each grew **65% between 2021–22 and 2024–25**, outpacing overall transfer applicant growth (41%).
- Independent transfer applicants were **1.7 to 2.1 times as likely to identify as first-generation students**, depending on subgroup.
- Parenting applicants were an extreme case in almost all analyses we considered
- They were also **1.5 to 1.7 times as likely to live in ZIP codes with median household incomes below the national median** and **1.4 to 1.7 times as likely to receive Common App fee waivers**.

Academic pathways are more complex for independent students

Independent transfer applicants bring more varied and complex academic histories into the admissions process.

- Independent students were **more likely to have attended public associate's-granting institutions** and less likely to have attended private four-year institutions.
- They were **more likely to have completed 60 or more college credits** and more likely to have already earned an associate's degree or higher.
- Independent transfer applicants were also far more likely to be **returning after a break in enrollment**, rather than transferring directly from continuous enrollment.



These patterns highlight the importance of **clear articulation agreements, transparent credit evaluation, and flexible degree pathways**, especially for students returning after time away from college.

Application behavior reflects limited margin for error

Independent transfer applicants applied to fewer institutions and prioritized proximity to home.

- Independent applicants submitted between 1.4 (parenting applicants) and 1.9 (military-affiliated applicants) applications on average, compared to 2.0 for other transfer applicants.
- Independent applicants were substantially more likely to apply to institutions **in-state and within 50 miles of their residence**, reflecting the importance of geographic proximity for students balancing work, family, and other responsibilities.



While applying locally can reduce costs and logistical challenges, submitting fewer applications **may limit opportunity** if students receive limited information about affordability, credit transfer, or time to degree.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Supporting independent transfer students

The findings point to several opportunities for institutions and systems to better support independent transfer applicants:

- **Financial clarity matters.** Independent students may be especially sensitive to net price, aid eligibility, and FAFSA support—particularly those transferring from community colleges with tuition promise programs.
- **Credit transfer is critical.** Students with more prior credits, breaks in enrollment, or military experience face greater uncertainty in how credits apply toward degree requirements.
- **Proximity and flexibility matter.** Flexible scheduling, advising, childcare supports, and recognition of prior learning may influence where they choose to apply.
- **Encouraging informed choice is key.** Because many independent applicants apply to only one institution, institutions and advisors can help students better understand tradeoffs among financial aid, credit transfer, and time to degree.

Go Deeper

This research brief provides a comprehensive national benchmark for understanding independent applicants for transfer admission, drawing on Common App's uniquely rich application data.

Learn more about the contexts, academic pathways, and application behaviors of independent transfer applicants by reading [the full research brief here.](#)

